DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 686 CG 019 143

AUTHOR Esperon, James P.
TITLE Social Support over a Life Transition: College Graduation.
PUB DATE [Apr 86]
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association for Counseling and Development (Los Angeles, CA, April 20-23, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Graduates; Family Relationship; Friendship; *Graduation; Higher Education; Interpersonal Relationship; *Life Satisfaction; *Sex Differences; *Social Networks; *Social Support Groups
IDENTIFIERS *Life Transitions

ABSTRACT

To determine whether the change from the highly structured, peer-based life style associated with the college community to more heterogeneous environments would have a significant impact on graduates' social support networks, social support levels of 49 men and 49 women were assessed 1 month prior to college graduation, and 1 and 6 months following graduation. Subjects completed the Personal Support System Survey which measures the importance of and perceived satisfaction with 13 types of social support (love, physical intimacy, companionship, encouragement, acceptance, admiration, satisfaction/altruism, comfort, example, guidance, material assistance, knowledge, honesty) and assesses the composition and operation of the respondent's support network. The results indicated that subjects reported changes in their support networks following graduation. Although network size and the number of family members showed no change, the number of friendships which subjects reported declined while network density increased after graduation. The number of daily and yearly contact supporters also changed over time. Subjects' responses concerning the importance of support remained constant, while satisfaction with support declined in the post-graduation administrations. Significant sex differences were also revealed. Across all assessment points, men had more daily support members while women had more monthly support members. Women also felt that support was of greater importance than did men. Practitioners need to understand the social implications of college graduation and other life transitions and to identify individuals who may need additional sources of social support. (NB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED270686

Social Support Over a Life Transition: College Graduation

James P. Esperon

Counseling and Health Services
Youngstown State University
Youngstown, Ohio 44555

Running Head: Support & College Graduation

CG 019143

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

James P. Esperon

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Abstract

Social support levels of 49 men and 49 women were assessed one month prior to college graduation, and one and six months following graduation. It was theorized that the change from the highly structured, peer-based life style associated with the college community, to more heterogeneous environments would have a significant impact on the subjects' social support networks.

Results indicated that subjects did report changes in their support networks. Although network size and the number of family members showed no change, the number of friendships which subjects reported declined while network density increased. The number of daily and yearly contact supportors also changed over the study. Subjects' responses concerning the importance of support remained constant, however, satisfaction with support declined in the post-graduation administrations. Recommendations are offered regarding the uses of these findings for college and community mental health practitioners.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the social implications of a normal life transition, college graduation. Although a positive event, completion of college necessitates adjustments to new habits, tasks, and surroundings which can disrupt patterns of social interaction. This study assessed the social support preferences and resources of young adults one month prior to graduation, and one and six months following graduation.

Life Transitions and Social Support

Life transitions, e.g., divorce, retirement, death of a family member, relocation, etc., have been associated with higher levels of stress and increased risk of psychological distress and physical illness (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974). Common to all transitions is that individuals experience a personal discontinuity in their lives which requires coping with new demands of an altered life situation (Hopson & Adams, 1977; Schlossberg, 1981).

Social support has clearly emerged as a significant resource associated with successful management of life transitions and, subsequently, with enhanced physical and psychological well-being. For instance, the existence of satisfying relationships with family and friends has been correlated with superior post-divorce adjustment (Caldwell and Bloom, 1982; Raschke, 1977; Wilcox, 1981), adaptation to involuntary job loss (Gore, 1978), reduced stress for newly retired workers (Wan, 1982), lowered

susceptibility to depression in midcareer women who return to college (Roehl & Okun, 1984) and successful adjustment to adolescent pregnancy (Barrera, 1981).

Despite these findings, a general weakness in the measurement of social support is the failure of theorists to recognize its dynamic nature. Wilcox (1981) comments, "Most researchers have viewed support systems in a static fashion, attempting to relate network characteristics derived from measurements taken at one point in time to some health outcome"(p. 111). Yet, several longitudinal studies have found that social support is affected by life events such as unemployment (Atkinson, Liem, & Liem, 1983), final exams (Hirsch, 1979), and divorce (Caldwell & Bloom, 1982).

Support and College Graduation

In many respects, college graduation represents the beginning of a new life for young adults. This life is typically associated with an increased demand for self-sufficiency, autonomy, and the independent striving for success in the greater community or in graduate school. While these expectations can serve to impel individuals toward achievement and its concomitant satisfactions, difficulty in fulfilling these obligations can also precipitate stress.

In a recent speech, Kegan (1983) observed,

> You know every June somebody gets up and gives a completely unmemorable graduation address in which the audience is told: You've worked hard and you're about to graduate, you're on

> your own now and the world is waiting for you and good luck and goodbye. And no one ever says: You've worked hard, you're going to graduate, and you're going to need as much help now as you ever did!

Thus, the perception of college graduation as an initiation into self-sufficiency, may lead the person into believing that little social support should be needed in this particular life transition.

Quite the contrary, the multiple challenges associated with college graduation can be formidable and require much assistance. For instance, the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Interview (PERI) Life Events Scale (Dohrenwend, Krasnoff, Askenasy & Dohrenwend, 1982) and the Social Readjustment Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) include: starting work for the first time, beginning or ending school, change in financial state, change in residence, and change in living conditions, as moderate level sources of stress. Reasonably, it can be assumed that the accumulation of these life events during a single period of time could pose a threat to one's physical and emotional welfare without the adequate provision of social support.

Theorists also cite the importance of learning new roles as a chief characteristic of college graduation. Schlossberg (1984) contends that role changes associated with life transitions have the power to significantly influence a person's perception of either "belonging" or being "marginal". The author states, "The larger the difference in role and the less knowledge beforehand

about this role, the more marginal that individual will feel" (p. 38).

College graduation may also be a time when sources of support shift. Schlossberg (1981) asserts that there are three chief sources of support: (a) intimate relationships, (b) the family unit, and (c) the network of friends. Throughout the college years, students are in the process of shifting their reliance for support from the family unit to peers and intimate relationships (Chickering, 1974; Nugent, 1981). Thus, as college students develop autonomy and identity, they actively seek values and support members outside their immediate family (Stierlin, 1974).

Ironically, after four years of gradually shifting their sources of support from family to peers and intimate relationships, many new graduates return to the family unit (at least temporarily) where support from peers and intimates may be less available. Support from the family unit may also be less gratifying if the graduate feels that he/she is reassuming the role of "dependent child". Hence, it was theorized that the graduate's satisfaction with support would decline if contact with two of the three chief sources (network of friendships and intimate relationships) were temporarily diminished.

Methodology

Population and Sampling

The population consisted of 224 college seniors at a large, private university who resided in residence halls and planned to

Table 1 Post-Graduation Living Status

LIVING STATUS	JUNE	NOVEMBER
Living at home	71	54
Living alone	7	15
Living with others	12	26
No response	8	3
TOTAL SUBJECTS	98	98

Table 2 Post-Graduation Work Status

WORK STATUS	JUNE	NOVEMBER
Full-time work	40	68
Part-time work	13	11
Looking for work	34	8
No work/not looking	8	0
Graduate school	3	11
TOTAL SUBJECTS	98	98

graduate following Spring semester. Three of the twelve residence halls contained over 50% of the graduating seniors and were therefore selected for the study. Within these three halls, 111 of 134 students (55 males and 56 females) agreed to participate in the study. At the end of the seven month study, 49 males and 49 females (n=98) had completed all three administrations of the instrument.

At the beginning of the study (April's pre-graduation administration), the subjects' average age was 21.5 years and ranged from 20 to 24 years. During the course of the study, only one subject married. However, by the November administration, six other subjects were engaged to be married. Furthermore, subjects in the post-graduation period tended to be highly mobile, as 54 separate changes of address were recorded. Table 1 gives an indication of the subjects' living status following graduation. Table 2 displays the work status of the subjects throughout the study.

Instrument

The study used the Personal Support System Survey (P3S) (Pearson, 1982) which has two primary sections. The first section of the P3S uses 5 point Likert-type scales to measure the importance of and perceived satisfaction with the following 13 types of social support: love, physical intimacy, companionship, encouragement, acceptance, admiration, satisfaction (altruism), comfort, example, guidance, material assistance, knowledge and honesty. The second section of the P3S assesses the composition

and operation of the subject's support network. Respondents are asked to list the names of people who they consider to be in their support network. Respondents then report other network characteristics including: the relationship of the supportor to the respondent (e.g., father, friend, sister, neighbor, etc.); the frequency of interaction with each supportor (i.e., daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly); and the density of the network (the degree to which members of the network know each other).

A test/retest reliability study of the P3S was conducted by Braunlich, Boeshaar, and Esperon (1985) on 40 subjects over a one week interval. The researchers found the following reliability coefficients for the network characteristics of social support: size ($r=.73$, $p<.0001$), number of daily contact members ($r=.58$, $p<.0001$), number of weekly contact members ($r=.37$, $p<.02$), number of monthly contact members ($r=.48$, $p<.002$), number of yearly contact members ($r=.51$, $p<.001$), number of family members ($r=.80$, $p<.0001$), number of friends ($r=.63$, $p<.0001$), and density ($r=.78$, $p<.0001$). Reliability of the overall importance of support score (mean of the 13 types) was found to be $r=.73$ ($p<.0001$), while the overall satisfaction with support score was $r=.67$ ($p<.0001$). Internal consistency coefficients of .74 and .75 were found for the importance of and satisfaction with support scales respectively. The P3S also possesses strong face validity, construct validity (Velazquez-Acevedo, 1982) and has been successfully employed with the college-aged population (Kane, 1982; Claudio, 1983).

Data Analysis

Repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the support network variables. These variables included: size (total number of supporters), frequency of contact (supportors contacted daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly), composition (family or friends), and density. Hirsch (1980) defines density as, "the number of relationships that exist among the members of an individual's support system as a proportion of the total possible number of such relationships"(p. 161). Since density is expressed as a proportion, a corrective measure (arc sine transformation) was needed and performed prior to the analysis of variance (Neter & Wasserman, 1974).

Repeated measures ANOVA was also used to examine variations across administration points in the subjective aspects of support (i.e., importance of and satisfaction with support). An overall importance of support score was calculated by averaging the responses from the 13 individual support categories. An overall satisfaction score was calculated by averaging the satisfaction ratings of those support categories which had been rated as important (rated 1 or 2 on a 5-point Likert-type scale) by the subject. Given a significant F-score in the main test (ANOVA: $p<.05$), a Duncan Multiple Range Test was used to determine the nature of the difference.

Results

Support Network Characteristics

Table 3 displays the data for support network characteristics. There were no significant changes in the size of the support network over the seven month study. Frequency of contact did show some change as the number of support members classified as daily contact peaked in June. All means were significantly different from each other. There were no significant changes in the number of support members classified as weekly or monthly. The number of support members described as yearly indicated that June was lower than either April or November.

In terms of composition of the subjects' networks, the number of family members did not significantly change over time. The number of members listed as friends, however, declined immediately following graduation. There is some indication that this decline was of a temporary nature as the number of friends tended to recover in November. Results for the last network variable, density, indicated a significant increase from April to June.

Importance of and Satisfaction with Support

Table 4 summarizes the findings for the importance subjects attached to social support. Note that lower scores indicate a greater degree of importance ascribed to support. Results showed that the importance of support remained virtually constant over the seven month period. There were no significant changes.

Table 3 Network Variables: Main Effects for Time

Variable	April Mean	June Mean	Nov. Mean	F-value	p	Significant between which intervals
Network size	8.27	7.88	8.01	1.81	n.s.	-
Daily members	2.45	3.42	2.95	12.12	.0001	All intervals different
Weekly members	2.80	2.34	2.44	2.27	n.s.	-
Monthly members	1.91	1.51	1.65	2.15	n.s.	-
Yearly members	0.95	0.48	0.86	3.48	.03	June lower than Apr. or Nov.
Family members	3.51	3.64	3.41	1.77	n.s.	-
Friend members	4.61	4.13	4.49	3.28	.04	June lower than April
Network density	54%	66%	57%	6.43	.002	June higher than April

Table 4 Importance and Satisfaction with Support: Summary of Main Effects for Time
(*lower scores indicate more importance and satisfaction)

Variable	April Mean	June Mean	Nov. Mean	F-value	p	Significance between intervals
Importance of support	1.94	1.96	1.96	0.43	n.s.	-
Satisfaction with support	2.15	2.28	2.32	4.79	.01	April more satisfied than June or Nov.

The data for satisfaction with support are also displayed in Table 4. Again, lower scores reflect greater satisfaction with support. Satisfaction levels declined from April to June and remained significantly lower into November. Thus, the findings for satisfaction portray a longer-term effect.

Gender Differences

Significant gender differences were found on three variables. Across all assessment points, men had more daily support members ($F=9.75$; $p<.002$) while women had more monthly support members ($F=6.78$; $p<.01$). Women also felt that support was of greater importance than men ($F=14.37$; $p<.0002$).

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that college graduation is a time when social resources undergo several important changes. Specifically, it was found that support networks were characterized as having more daily and less yearly members, less friends, and denser networks from April to June. Also recent graduates were significantly less satisfied with their support in the post-graduation months of June and November as compared to the pre-graduation assessment in April. This supports the belief that many life transitions involve a reorganization or disruption of the social environment (Schlossberg, 1981).

Although the number of daily support contacts increased following graduation, the overall satisfaction with support still declined. Given this phenomenon, one speculates that the type of

support being offered was not of the nature which promoted greater satisfaction following graduation. A reasonable explanation may lie in the decline in the number of friendships following graduation. It may be that recent graduates miss these relationships and/or are trying to become less dependent upon their families as a chief source of support.

It is also likely that the increase in density between April and June was the result of the support systems becoming more family-based as many new graduates temporarily returned home to live. Although there were no significant differences in the number of family members among the administrations, the proportion of family members in the support network did increase between April and June as friendships declined. This would account for the temporary rise in density.

Heller and Swindle (1983) theorize that low density support networks may be most beneficial when people must establish linkages to new groups. They cite job seeking and relocation (two major components of college graduation), as primary examples of such life transitions. Although the above hypothesis seems quite reasonable, no significant correlation between density and satisfaction with support appeared in this study.

The finding that the overall importance of support remained unchanged may seem surprising given the demands of the events surrounding graduation. Future research may need to explore whether this variable is equally stable in other life transitions. If this proved to be the case, the importance of support would be

viewed less as being responsive to life circumstances and more as being an enduring trait.

The decline in the graduates' overall satisfaction with support may have occurred for two reasons. First, separating from the college community most likely reduced the amount of support typically obtained from peers. In fact, subsequent analyses indicated that satisfaction with "companionship" declined more than any other type of support ($F=11.91$, $p<.001$; April more satisfied than either June or Nov.). Second, if the graduates' support members were also involved in the same life transition, i.e. graduation, it could limit the members' effectiveness to provide support. With reference to this type of situation, Eckenrode and Gore (1981) theorize,

> As levels of stress in networks increase, the probability of individuals obtaining support from those networks decreases, which, in turn, should affect the ability of all individuals within those networks to cope successfully with stressful life events or chronically stressful life conditions. (p. 63)

Implications

The results of this study portray college graduation as an event associated with several important changes in social support resources. College and community mental health practitioners need to be aware of the social implications of college graduation and other normal life transitions (e.g., relocation, unemployment, retirement, etc.) and to identify individuals who may need additional sources of social support.

The development of strategies to address social support deficits to prevent unhealthy levels of stress can be useful for college and community based practitioners who work with recent graduates. For instance, college counseling centers might offer workshops on the nature and impact of life transitions and social support. Particular attention should be focused on developing strategies to bolster social support in the post-graduation community. Following graduation, corporate personnel officers could implement programs which provide social support (e.g., orientation groups, assignment of experienced employees to new employees, etc.) and generally attempt to educate recent graduates to their new environment (e.g., physicians, housing, banks, social groups, etc.). Similarly, community organizations (e.g., church, civic, etc.) could sponsor support groups for new members of the community which could help serve as temporary support systems until the individual develops more adequate social resources.

In summary, life transitions frequently disrupt important social bonds. Primary prevention activities can help address support deficits to minimize adjustment difficulties for recent college graduates or others experiencing common life transitions.

References

Atkinson, T., Liem, R., & Liem, J. (1983). The social costs of unemployment: Implications for social support. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Anaheim, CA.

Barrera, M. (1981). Social support in the adjustment of pregnant adolescents: Assessment issues. In B.H. Gottlieb (Ed.), Social networks and social support (pp. 69-96). Beverly Hills: Sage.

Braunlich, M.F., Boeshaar, D.K. & Esperon, J.P. (1985). The Personal Support System Survey: Reliability data. Unpublished manuscript, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.

Caldwell, R. & Bloom, B. (1982). Social support: Its structure and impact on marital disruption. American Journal of Community Psychology, 10, 647-666.

Chickering, A.W. (1974). Education and identity. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Claudio, L.C. (1983). The personal support systems of Puerto Rican freshman college students: Return migrants and nonmigrants. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University.

Dohrenwend, B.S., & Dohrenwend, B.P. (1974). Stressful life events. New York: Wiley.

Dohrenwend, B.S., Krasnoff, L., Askenasy, A.R., & Dohrenwend, B.P. (1982). The Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Interview Life Events Scale. In L. Goldberger and S. Greznitz (Eds.), Handbook of Stress. New York: The Free Press.

Eckenrode, J.,& Gore, S. (1981). Stressful events and social supports.
In B.H. Gottlieb (Ed.), Social networks and social support (pp.43-68). Beverly Hills: Sage.

Gore, S. (1978). The effect of social support in moderating the health consequences of unemployment. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 19, 157-165.

Heller, K., & Swindle, R. (1983). Social networks, perceived social support and coping with stress. In R.D. Felner, (Ed.), Preventive psychology: Theory, research and practice. New York: Pergamon Press.

Hirsch, B. (1979). Psychological dimensions of social networks: A multimethod analysis. American Journal of Community Psychology, 7, 263-277.

Hirsch, B.J. (1980). Natural support systems and coping with major life changes. American Journal of Community Psychology, 8, 159-172.

Holmes, T.H., & Rahe, R.H. (1967). The social readjustment scale. Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 11, 213-218.

Hopson, B., & Adams, J.D. (1977). Towards an understanding of transition. In J. Adams, J. Hayes and B. Hopson (Eds.), Transition: Understanding and managing personal change. Montclair, NJ: Allenheld and Osmun.

Kane, S.W. (1982). An analysis of kinship in personal support systems. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University.

Kegan, R. (1983). Love and limit setting. Speech given to Cambridge Forum.

Neter, J., & Wasserman, W. (1974). Applied linear statistical models. Homewood, IL.: Richard D. Irwin, Inc.

Nugent, F.A. (1981). Professional counseling: An overview. Monterey, CA: Brooks Cole.

Pearson, R.E. (1982). Support: Exploration of a basic concept in counseling and informed help. Personnel and Guidance Journal, 61, 83-87.

Raschke, H.J. (1977). The role of social participation in postseparation and postdivorce adjustment. Journal of Divorce, 10, 129-140.

Roehl, J., & Okun, M. (1984). Depression symptoms among women reentering college: The role of negative life events and family social support. Journal of College Student Personnel, 25, 251-254.

Schlossberg, N.K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. The Counseling Psychologist, 9, 2-18.

Schlossberg, N.K. (1984). Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory. New York: Springer.

Stierlin, H. (1974). Separating parents and adolescents. New York: Quadrange/New York Times Book Company.

Velazquez-Acevedo, A. (1982). A study of the relationship between interpersonal support and the incidence of suicidal ideation of Puerto Rican college students. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University.

Wan, T.T. (1982). Stressful life events, social support networks, and gerontological health. Lexington: Lexington Books.

Wilcox, B.L. (1981). Social support in adjusting to marital disruption. In B.H. Gottlieb (Ed.), Social networks and social support (pp. 97-116). Beverly Hills: Sage.